

Section 1

Total Views, Forms of Life, and Open Inquiry

Does Humanity Have a Cosmic Role? Protecting and Restoring the Planet

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I am practically overwhelmed by this reception and I don't understand why so many people would come to listen to something that seems to be one of the last questions you would ask, namely, does humanity have a cosmic role in protecting and, maybe to some extent, restoring the planet. I'll say that we might have a cosmic role. And that means it is more than a planetary role. Let me explain what I mean.

We are on a planet that is a tiny, tiny speck in an enormous galaxy we call the Milky Way. It is nearly impossible to think that with so many planets and stars, there are not other planets resembling the planet we have the honour to inhabit. So I think we are not alone. But there are such distances that we are, practically speaking, completely alone, so far as I can see. It might take 50,000 years to get an answer to a Christmas card, and while I feel sure there are some bodies out there who would like to get a Christmas card, we will never get in touch with these people if relativity theory is correct.

If we have on this planet a role that could be called cosmic, I think it is because we are the only creatures within enormous distances, creatures that can consciously feel and understand life, what's going on, what it has cost, and how long a time it has taken to have people here. Three thousand million years, this miracle of evolution has taken! When creatures moved out of the water and onto the land, they were demonstrating what the French have called an "élan vitale." This means breaking the limitations, getting into new worlds and new ways of living, transcending any kind of goal you have so far, any kind of style.

So you crawl up out of the water: I think there are still possibilities that humanity could crawl up to somewhat more dignified behaviour. It sounds unlikely but it could happen that within a very short time, say five hundred years, we could reach a level of consciousness about where we are and what we are able to do, such that we would say “We cannot treat this planet as we do.” And in a manner that is completely ethically justifiable, we will try to be fewer instead of being more and more. Wherever you are, you should live on the land in a way that does not destroy it.

This seems very unlikely, but so many unlikely things have happened this century. There have been some very bad things, such as wars, but there were other, more cheerful things that were absolutely unpredictable. So, I am an optimist, for the 22nd Century, that we will be on the way to achieving more ecological sustainability. But in the 21st Century, I think we will have a much worse time before we have the courage and enough motivation to change our behaviour to enjoy the planet without destroying it. In the long run, we will manage, but we need to have a long-term perspective. The Earth has fantastic resources, and if we can just reduce the number of our bad habits, things will go all right.

But then what about restoration? Many people think that we have destroyed, or standardized (which is a much better word for it) the landscapes. Not only have we reduced biodiversity but we have reduced differences of every kind. Restoration is very difficult, and I do not think we can restore very much. Rather, we can limit what we do of the bad things in areas still not dominated by humans. Instead of wilderness, I use the term “free nature.” One great goal is that every little child should have access to free nature, because it will help them understand very easily that other living beings, like themselves, like to live, they are wonderful to look at, and to be together with.

I started being together with certain small animals in the water when I was about four. When I was walking in the water, tiny fish and crustaceans would run away, then circle back under my foot; because they like to have places to hide, they hid from me under my foot. I felt this tremendous power that we have as human beings compared to those tiny crabs, but also I felt the nearness of these creatures at the same time. Most children don’t have this opportunity any longer and that is bad. So we have to go back again and give every small child the opportunity to experience nonhuman dominated areas. That is the great goal, I think. It makes me optimistic to hear about offering teenage criminals in big cities opportunities to get into the national parks to

experience, often for the first time, free nature. After a couple of weeks, they see the same as I see, even though I have had all these opportunities already early in my life.

On the other hand, we know that we have a system of economic growth with a tendency to say “yes” to bigger and bigger markets. In this way, countries such as Japan, the United States, and Europe can agree to collaborate, so that we get ten times as much trade, ten times as much transport, and so on into the future. At the same time that the ecology movement, especially the more radical deep ecology movement, is getting stronger, the opponents are also gaining in strength. These are not people who lack sensitivity, but people who are just part of the system. The so-called green backlash, the forces against taking ecology seriously, are rapidly gaining in power. This will limit efforts to restore and the possibility for political forces to implement new policies. In Norway, as in many other countries, we talk about politicians in a rather negative way, but then we vote for exactly the same kind of people next year. My reaction is that we should not talk this way because we are the ones who vote for these people. If somebody is really courageous, saying that we must reduce our material standard of living and retain our quality of life, then we are mostly silent. We criticize when they say something we don’t like, but we don’t say much when we like what they say. It is my impression that it is still the “ordinary people,” those who feel they have no power, who do have the power to change.

In terms of the cosmic role, I think it means that we should try to internalize the feeling of the millions of years behind us. You cannot neglect who you really are and where you are. It is so important for us sometimes to truly feel what fantastic creatures we are; to recognize that the difference between Einstein and Leonardo de Vinci and you is small compared with the difference between you and any other creature on this planet. We are such fantastic beings in our capacities. It is inconceivable that we could neglect who we are, neglect thinking how great we are compared with anything else within any distance. We are able to think and to imagine an immense number of kinds of words and worlds, which nobody else on this planet can do. Couldn’t we, more often, do things and teach things that are relevant to the deepest knowledge and deepest feelings we have on this planet?

This is my answer, and it is only formulated as a question because what I am saying here, and what I am hoping (and what I am hoping not), is that nobody is competent in these questions, nobody. We should better reflect on who we are, and feel that the choices we have as humans are not the same choices as for a pig, although a pig is a wonderful

creature. We have the feeling, I think correctly, that the variety of choices open to a pig compared with us is tiny. The choices we have are large because of our brains, which we use mostly for no good. One of my speeches, which has been repeated many times over the radio, asks, “How can you undirect yourself, as you seem to do, when you have so much creativity?” Our needs are so immensely fewer in number than we seem to believe, looking at how much we consume. I think it has to do with a fundamental uncertainty inside; if you are a little uncertain of yourself, it is easier to follow the system, to follow what others do.

Not all people are content doing the same as others, listening the same, looking the same, telling the same stories. Sometimes people want to go in a different or uncommon direction. In my life, I have had a certain amount of independence. I listen to what others have written and said, and I am glad to get the instruction, but in matters outside mathematics, I also can identify things I like or don’t like.

I will end with a proposal: Think of yourself as having a cosmic role, and then contribute to perfecting that role. And if I come back next year, I would ask how people are doing with their cosmic role. How conspicuous consumption might be less and yet businesses are still thriving. The changes will not lower quality of life. And I end with that term “quality of life”; if it is measured according to how you feel about your world and your existence and not by how much you have, then you will feel greater, not bigger, but greater in your cosmic role.